

State agency ordered to work fast in lawsuit over oil spill

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SACRAMENTO - Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, chair of California's State Lands Commission, directed the agency Monday to swiftly gather information needed for a detailed lawsuit against those responsible for last month's oil spill in San Francisco Bay.

The state is pursuing a different legal tactic than the U.S. government, which already filed suit in federal court in San Francisco, because more of the land was under California's jurisdiction.

The state, in carefully determining the full extent of environmental damage, hopes to recover the most funds possible for restoration.

"What we know is that thousands of birds have died or been injured, Californians have been turned away from public beaches and parks, and the state faces tremendous costs in undoing the damage done to our fouled coastline," Garamendi said.

The spill of 58,000 gallons of thick oil from a Chinese cargo ship occurred Nov. 7 when the vessel hit the Bay Bridge.

The lieutenant governor said "a large percentage of the despoiled areas are state lands, owned by the people of California and held in trust by the state."

Garamendi said he wants the Lands Commission he chairs to take a major role in seeking legal remedies. The low-profile commission has key responsibilities in overseeing public lands but often deals with issues of minor importance to the general public.

The commission, created by the State Land Act of 1938, manages 4 million acres of lands held in public trust. The

territory includes the beds of California's rivers, lakes and streams, as well as the state's tide and submerged lands extending 3 miles off the state's 1,130 miles of coastline.

The quantity of oil spilled in San Francisco Bay last month spread far but is dwarfed by the size of others, such as one off the coast of Alaska in 1989, when the Exxon Valdez dumped 11 million gallons of crude oil.

Garamendi, who served as deputy secretary of the interior for the Clinton administration, was involved in the aftermath of the Exxon Valdez accident in 1989, when 11 million gallons of crude oil spilled off the coast of Alaska.

Also a former state senator and statewide-elected insurance commissioner, Garamendi ran unsuccessfully for governor and is widely viewed as a potential candidate once again.

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